

The Game as an Instrument of Honors Students' Personal Development in the SibFU Honors College

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Abstract: Honors colleges often serve as laboratories for pedagogical innovation, where new learning strategies and technologies are created both in the sphere of honors education and in the broader context of universities. This study describes a method of “organizational activity games” (OAG) introduced in the honors college of Siberian Federal University (SibFU) in Russia. The author explores the advantages of the game method for reaching the goal of honors students' personal development. The theory and history of the game, invented in the Russian school of methodology by G. P. Shchedrovitskii, is explored in its relation to the theoretical principles of honors education. This research shows that the philosophy of games designed to create an intellectual elite of independently thinking citizens can be effectively employed in honors education. The study reveals how the objectives of the game—to develop and study new methods of teaching and learning in universities—contribute to the inventive pedagogies of honors colleges. The author provides insight into the various stages of the inaugural organizational activity game conducted at the SibFU Honors College. Results prove that the game may be regarded as a new method of honors teaching and learning applicable to honors programs in institutions worldwide.

Keywords: higher education—Krasnoyarsk (Russia); educational games; learning strategies; student development; Shchedrovitskii, Georgii Petrovich, 1929–1994

The goal of honors education is to benefit the gifted and talented students who are willing and able to do more than a regular program can offer, certainly in terms of academic challenge but often in their broader personal development as well (Brock, 2008; Hébert & McBee, 2007). Honors

students are identified not only by their high academic achievements but also by their creative thinking and inclination to have deeper, more meaningful, and transformative learning experiences (Wolfensberger, 2012). The greatest transformation an honors education can offer to a learner is the experience of becoming the active force of learning. This development of students' personal agency is one of the priorities of honors education.

Exceptional students call for exceptional pedagogical methods. The organizers of honors programs always take risks when they opt for innovative approaches in teaching and learning, but the risks are justified when the innovative pedagogy leads honors education toward achieving its goals. When the SibFU Honors College opened its doors to students of Siberian Federal University, its organizers took the risk of relying on the principles of the organizational activity game (OAG) as the methodology of honors education.

Georgii P. Shchedrovitskii, the founder of the OAG methodology, defined the game as a special formula for organizing and developing active, collective thinking (Shchedrovitskii & Kotelnikov, 1988). In the 1980s, he elaborated a technology of organizing group communication and problem solving. He approached constructive thinking as a process of comparable importance to the evolution of the universe, arguing that the future can be what we make it, first in our thought and then in reality (Bureev & Shchedrovitskii, 2004).

Shchedrovitskii (Shchedrovitskii & Kotelnikov, 1988) described the game as a formula for thinking in which varying content that is "weakly normed, plastic, and unstable" may be embodied and played out. This capacity of the organizational activity game as a universal formula for simulating different types and kinds of collective thinking activity enabled the Russian methodologists to use it for the most varied purposes and functions. Various content can be represented and simulated in the game because of its flexible form. Within the sphere of education, the game can serve as a method of teaching students. Within the sphere of culture, OAG can be used to obtain new examples, models, standards, and norms. Within the organizational and managerial sphere, OAG can be used to create new institutions. Within the sphere of national research institutes, OAG can be used to create new projects and new research programs, to state and solve scientific problems.

In the OAG, professionals from different areas of activity collaborated on solving problems and creating new products, technologies, and institutional forms. They achieved results by engaging in collective thinking that was supra-disciplinary and supra-professional, i.e., methodological. The purpose of the

game was to construct a new activity of collective thinking and to reorganize its individual components on the basis of the interests of the whole.

The history of organizational activity games at Siberian Federal University traces back to the mid-eighties. Although the OAG method was already known and used (though not widespread, especially in higher education), some of the games were conducted as an experiment on whether it could help solve educational problems. The “classic” OAGs were meant to create a collaborative environment that develops solutions to real-world problems in the professional area. In those years, a major discussion had been taking place in both academic and educational communities about new challenges that the transitional economy and industry during Perestroika set for higher education in the USSR. In 1986, a game named “forms and means of professional training for a new type of specialists in a modern university,” which was organized at Krasnoyarsk State University (as it was called at that time), was one of the ways to address these issues. Another game of the same year set the educational professionalization of junior faculty as the main topic.

Other games had more field-specific topics. Several OAGs were dedicated to applying the theory of developing education created by Vassilii Davydov and Daniil Elconin to teaching and learning practices. One of the major results of these games was the sense that developing school environments required not only specific professional training of teachers but also intensive everyday collaboration between teachers and psychologists. The role of psychology in education became a topic of a series of games in 1985–1988, during which the new Department of Psychology at the university introduced and developed a new project. The game reshaped the structure and learning method at the university in Krasnoyarsk.

Since 1988, the format of OAG has been used on a regular basis in the university, and it has been adapted to meet educational goals. The focus deliberately shifted from real-world industry and production problems to the professional self-determination of students. The large majority of the students were recent high school graduates and had no professional background; therefore, they had no solid ground for professional self-determination. For first-year students, the inaugural game aimed to clarify their educational intentions and to help them set preliminary goals for their education.

In the twenty-first century, the idea of OAG at SibFU developed in the School of Economics, Management and Environmental Studies. The first-year master’s students took the course titled “Techniques of Self-Determination and Self-Development Under Conditions of Uncertainty,” which

was conducted as a single OAG for master's students with the thematic topic of each game designed to create specified conditions of uncertainty. The objective of the game was to enable students to act effectively in each of these conditions and to overcome the uncertainty.

Since 2017, the concept of OAG has served as an integral part of the newly established SibFU Honors College. The first reason to introduce OAG methodology to the SibFU Honors College practices was to develop the collaborative competence of students. The honors college is a community of gifted and talented individuals who specialize in different areas of science but whose capacities for teamwork and for collaboration in group projects are of utmost value. In a game, honors students encountered assignments and tasks for which the solutions required the participation of a large team that included representatives of different professions, scientific disciplines, and subject areas.

Shchedrovitskii identified nine types of games according to their semantic orientation (Shchedrovitskii & Kotelnikov, 1988):

1. solution of industrial organizational problems;
2. solution of fundamental scientific problems;
3. programming the development of radical innovations;
4. programming comprehensive scientific research;
5. developing new forms of instruction in institutions of higher education;
6. advanced training of personnel;
7. comparative analysis and study of different types of thinking activity;
8. study of structures, processes, and mechanisms of thinking activity;
9. study of the interactions and interrelations of individuals and groups in institutional structures.

In higher education, any of these nine types of games can be performed with students, faculty, or staff members as players. The rules of the game allow students to take roles of professionals, scientists, or managers of education, for instance. When the OAG aims at studying interactions within the institution, faculty may play it together with members of the university administration to work out a new form of organization or to find a solution to a problem. In the game, players shift the social barriers existing between them in reality outside

the game and act empowered by the new rules. The players of OAG always take the roles of creators, critical thinkers, and collaborative team members.

In 2017, when Siberian Federal University launched the honors college, it was one of the pioneers of honors education in Russia. OAG served the purpose of developing a new form of education within the university. In the game, students together with faculty and staff were invited to create the honors college as a novel and different learning environment. Participants defined the rules of organizing the environment, first as players and then as actors. The game was played outside of the university campus on neutral ground. The circumstances provided the freedom to play new roles and contributed to productive thinking by all participants. For instance, students played the parts of provosts, directors, deans, and other managers of higher education. Participants took the OAG endeavor very seriously, and the process was never similar to a theatre performance, so the roles were enacted without any shade of doubt about the right to play them, and the players were simultaneously the playwrights of the acts they played. The scenario of the game was based on the balance between following the script and the improvisation.

The function of the inaugural OAG in the SibFU Honors College was also to program the development of radical innovations in higher education. The game was an instrument of conflict resolution (Khasan, 2018). During the game, students worked in small and large groups on the resolution to a conflict between regular teaching and learning procedures in the university and the different learning format of the honors college. Before the game, the participants knew little or nothing about the tradition of honors education. Their task was to make an honors college as they imagined it according to their learning demands. The conditions of the game fueled students' activity, gave freedom to the stream of their ideas, and contributed to developing their agency as learners. Traditionally in Russian universities, education is teacher-oriented, with students led by instructors according to a predetermined program identical for all students of the same specialization and where students are not given any chance to choose the courses they study. On the contrary, the SibFU Honors College employs a student-oriented approach, with students acting as leaders of their education and creators of their unique learning trajectories. Honors students have the opportunity to choose the set of specifically designed honors courses, and they decide on the number of courses in the set, with four courses as the minimum. The game identified the demand for educational freedom and learning leadership. For students of Siberian Federal University, the most innovative element in the new learning

environment of the honors college was the role of educational enthusiast that each student acquired. In accordance with the theory of OAG, the honors college appeared first as a product of collective thought and then as reality.

Possible solutions and outcomes of the OAG included detailed formulation of complex problems, introducing a system of new structures into different spheres of social practice and developing different systems of thinking activity. Also, the game gave methodologists opportunities to investigate a variety of other outcomes:

- a system of collective-thinking activity;
- the behavior and actions of individuals under different organizational, social, and cultural conditions;
- the processes of self-determination and self-organization of people under conditions that are new for them;
- interrelations and interactions among people in small and large groups (including conflict interactions and struggles);
- processes and methods of problem solving;
- processes of goal definition; and
- situations, processes, and mechanisms of learning and teaching.

These outcomes make the method of OAG invaluable in honors education. Honors students develop the competence not only to study well but also to reflect on how they study and what they study for. The ideal honors learner has the capacity for educational reflection, and OAG serves as the catalyst for improving this capacity.

According to Shchedrovitskii (Shchedrovitskii & Kotelnikov, 1988), the game enabled the participants to define themselves not only in the game but also in society as a whole. The contradictions and conflicts in the game were perceived as manifestations of significant contradictions within a given profession, discipline, or institution. After having been engaged in a thinking activity, the participants in the collective work began to project and program their future thinking activity; they began to change and transform themselves as communicators and practical thinkers. These possible OAG results correlate to the ideals of honors education aimed at the personal development of students who are ready to commit themselves to becoming educated members of a democratic society and to pursuing education for life, citizenship, and career (Sederberg, 2015).

The SibFU Honors College offers its two-year program to second- and third-year undergraduates who excel in their studies at the university. At Siberian Federal University, the honors college was introduced as a way to resolve the conflict between needing a satisfying learning experience for extraordinary students with high educational demands while also providing the ordinary program of the university. The second- and third-year students already had the experience of studying in the regular programs at the university. Although they excelled in these learning programs, the alternative learning experience offered by the SibFU Honors College greatly appealed to them. Admission at later stages of their higher education allowed students to reflect on elements still missing in their learning experience and to take a conscious, intentional step in their personal development. The SibFU Honors College is organized for those students who ask themselves questions like these:

- How can I use the knowledge that I have?
- How can I realize my potential?
- How can I generate ideas and bring them to life?
- How can I inspire others with my ideas?

The honors college promised its prospective students a place to find answers to these and other similar questions. The OAG structured the learning process at the SibFU Honors College and contributed to students' educational reflection in answering these questions.

The goal of the inaugural game was to use the SibFU Honors College as a model for educational relations between honors students, faculty, and staff. Participants were also engaged in collective thinking about the ideal scheme for integrating the honors college into the broader university community, on the roles that honors college can play within universities. The objectives of the OAG were to formalize the needs of participants and their expectations for honors education. As players, students and teachers were invited to answer the question "What is my aspiration for becoming a member of the honors community?" In the game, the search for an answer required self-determination and goal setting. In the course of the inaugural game, honors students played the roles of educational architects in charge of constructing their own new learning environment.

The game continued for two days, with seventy honors students taking part in it. Day one began by setting goals for the game, defining general rules, and explaining the reasons that the OAG served as the starting point

for organizing activities in the SibFU Honors College. In the first act of the game, the students engaged in a procedure entitled “Images,” which evolved in two stages. In the first stage, the participants were encouraged to imagine individually what they would become when their studies in the honors college were over: “Suppose the honors college would have given me everything I hoped for. What would I be like then? What would I be capable of? What competences would I acquire?” Students presented their answers to these questions in visual forms, and the drawings were put on display so each student could see the works of all the others. By studying the products of visual thinking, the participants were invited to find their alter egos in like-minded people. Students who held similar views on their future selves formed small groups with seven or eight participants in each group.

The second stage of “Images” was collaborative as each group of honors students was given an hour to create a collective image on the same theme. The group images were then all presented to the audience. The students demonstrated and discussed a visual image. “Hands,” for instance, presented hands reaching for a dream. Another version of the same idea was presented in a drawing “World in my Hands,” where the honors college was shown as a silver plate with the globe on it. The authors of the drawing understood the world as full of opportunities with the honors college acting as facilitator for taking them. A visual image “Honors Bridge” represented the human transformation of an ordinary human being into a superman through collaboration with others. An image called “Homo Communicatos” showed the value of effective communication in personal development. Images of “ladders” were popular among the ways students envisioned changes in themselves.

After a break, the students continued working in the same groups. Their thinking activities were devoted to finding collective answers to the question “If we want our image to come true, what element should the honors program never lack?” In their answers the students spoke about the ideal learning process they envisioned in the honors college. The collective discussion proved that students thought there should be no teacher as the indisputable authority in the honors college. According to students’ opinions, honors faculty should act as consultants and tutors. Also expressed was the need for feedback, for receiving responses. Students proposed an alternative method of evaluating the learning outcomes: that it should take place through personal individual reflection. Students mutually agreed that honors education should be committed to the accomplishment of innovative activities and devoted to the development of students’ initiative and creative thinking. Honors students

welcomed collaborative interdisciplinary projects where they could work with faculty as equal participants.

Day two saw honors students creating collaborative maps of the honors college that correlated to the ideas formulated in the previous stages of the game. Discussion of the honors maps provided detailed perspectives on the students' vision of the progress of their studies, the skills to be developed, and the learning outcomes to be achieved. Teachers and students acted as visionaries who employed their visual thinking to chart maps of the ideal honors college and to outline various learning trajectories on the maps.

The inaugural organization activity game showed the advantages of the method in honors education, where the game may be used to obtain new models of teaching, learning standards, and norms. OAG is an instrument to shape and reshape the various forms of honors colleges in different regional, national, and international contexts. Within the sphere of national research institutes, OAG has proved to be an effective method to solve complex problems, to start new projects and new research programs, and to enhance the personal development of honors students as creative thinkers open to a constructive relationship with the world.

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